

SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad SIT Digital Collections

MA TESOL Collection

SIT Graduate Institute

Fall 11-1-2012

“Teach to the Middle”: A Double Case Study of Two Multilevel EFL classes in the Middle East

Teresa Hernandez
SIT Graduate Institute

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/ipp_collection



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hernandez, Teresa, ““Teach to the Middle”: A Double Case Study of Two Multilevel EFL classes in the Middle East” (2012). *MA TESOL Collection*. 544.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/ipp_collection/544

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Graduate Institute at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in MA TESOL Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

“Teach to the Middle”:
A Double Case Study of Two Multilevel EFL classes in the Middle East

Teresa Hernandez

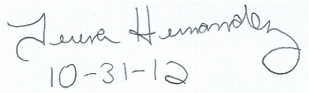
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in
Teaching Degree at the SIT Graduate Institute, World Learning, Brattleboro,
Vermont, USA

November 1st, 2012

IPP Advisor: Bonnie Mennell

I hereby grant permission for World Learning to publish my IPP on its websites and in any of its digital/electronic collections, and to reproduce and transmit my IPP electronically. I understand that World Learning's websites and digital collections are publicly available via the Internet. I agree that World Learning is NOT responsible for any unauthorized use of my IPP by any third party who might access it on the Internet or otherwise.

Student name:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leire Hernandez" is written above the date "10-31-12". To the right of the date is a small circular mark.

Date:

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to develop a comprehensive understanding of multilevel classes. It examines the pedagogical challenges that teachers often face in this teaching context, but it also considers the implications for what multilevel classes indicate about access to education in the EFL teaching field. The author has opted to examine two distinct cases of multilevel classes in the Middle East that she taught from 2010-2011 and in 2012. The first was a remedial 7th grade English class called 7F in an international school in Erbil, the capital city of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The second was an ESP course in Banking, which was part of a Continuing Education program at the university where the author presently teaches in Saudi Arabia. In both cases, the author examines both the pedagogical as well as administrative factors that come into play in a multilevel learning environment. As a result of reflecting upon both contexts, the author attempts to provide a richer and more complex understanding of her teaching experiences. This analysis results in the framework “Connect, Network and Empower” which offers a way to transform a traditional, teacher centered classroom into a student centered classroom and communal learning environment.

ERIC Descriptors

Cooperative Learning
Intercultural Communication
Problem Based Learning
Educational Strategies
Instructional Effectiveness
Small Group Instruction
Interdisciplinary Approach
Peer Teaching
Student Participation
Creative Thinking
Instructional Development

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank some very special people who have contributed to my learning process and passion for teaching. First I would like to thank Dr. Laurence Roth (Susquehanna University), Dr. Gary Fincke (Susquehanna University) and Dr. Sharlene Gilman (Penn State University) for writing letters of recommendation and being the first stepping stones in this journey to achieve a Masters Degree in Teaching.

I would also like to thank all of the instructors in the SMAT program at SIT Graduate Institute for providing the unique opportunity to study during the summer and work in the EFL teaching field overseas during the academic year.

My gratitude must also be given to my IPP advisor, Bonnie Mennell for all of her guidance throughout this process as well as her flexibility to work with my ambitious deadline.

I also need to thank my Mother, Doris Hernandez, who was, and continues to be, the best teacher that any daughter could ever have. Thank you for allowing me to sacrifice time away from home so I could crank out the first draft of this document during the last weeks of August.

Ironically enough, I would also like to thank every employer that I have had while teaching EFL abroad. From the past five years, I have learned so much about myself, life and connecting with other cultures. Without having EFL as the catalyst to make this travel and discovery possible, it would have never happened. I'm sure of it.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my students. In the three countries that I have been fortunate enough to have taught in so far, I have walked away from each teaching context having learned so much from them. Whether it was little Eric in Busan, Angel in Seoul, Heja in Kurdistan or Huda in Riyadh, they have all left a lasting impression upon my life and forever changed the person that I will become. *I carry your heart in my heart.*

Lastly, I would like to pay special tribute to my favorite teacher of all time, Harvey Edwards, my high school English teacher at Selinsgrove Area High School. If it weren't for you, I would have never known that I had wings to fly.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION.....	5
Statement of the Problem.....	5
Aim of Study.....	6
Structure of the Thesis.....	8
1. UNDERSTANDING THE MULTILEVEL CLASSROOM.....	9
The Multilevel Class.....	9
The Challenges of Teaching a Multilevel Class.....	10
Reasons for a Multilevel Class.....	11
<i>Administrative Benefits</i>	11
<i>Convenience of the Learner</i>	12
<i>Companionship and Support</i>	13
What are the Major Problems in Teaching a Multilevel Class?.....	14
<i>Methodology</i>	14
<i>Curriculum</i>	16
<i>Group Conflict</i>	16
<i>Needs Assessment</i>	17
<i>Assessment and Lesson Planning</i>	19
<i>Teacher Attitude</i>	19
What is the Teacher's Role in a Multilevel Class?.....	20
What is the Student's Responsibility in a Multilevel Class?.....	21
2. A MULTILEVEL CLASS IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ.....	23
Overview of the Region.....	23
The Teaching Context.....	25
<i>The Learning Culture</i>	26
<i>The Classroom Experience</i>	28

<i>Leveling for Proficiency</i>	30
7F.....	32
<i>Grammar</i>	33
<i>Vocabulary and Spelling</i>	34
<i>The Graded Reader</i>	35
<i>Writing</i>	35
<i>Teaching to the Test</i>	36
<i>The Strategic Assembling of Students</i>	37
<i>The Administration, Assessment and Accreditation</i>	38
<i>Learning Through Adversity</i>	38
3. A MULTILEVEL ESP BANKING COURSE IN A UNIVERSITY IN SAUDI ARABIA	
The Teaching Context.....	40
The Continuing Education Program.....	41
<i>Needs Assessment</i>	42
<i>Teaching Expectations</i>	42
The Classroom Experience.....	43
<i>Inevitably Ecological</i>	44
<i>Dates, Months and Time</i>	44
<i>The Students' Expectations</i>	45
Approaches Methods and Techniques.....	46
<i>Realia</i>	46
<i>Roleplaying</i>	47
<i>CLL</i>	47
<i>Using Color-coding in the Translation Process</i>	48
Creating Communities within a Multilevel Classroom.....	49
<i>The Classroom as a Community</i>	49
<i>Getting to Know the Students</i>	50
<i>Seating Arrangements</i>	51
<i>Making Class Participation Fun</i>	51
What I Learned: the Role of the Intermediate and Advanced Students.....	52
The Importance of Individualized Attention for Lower Level Students..	53

Feedback as a Logical Meaning-Making Tool.....	53
4. CONCLUSION.....	54
“Connect, Network and Empower”.....	54
<i>Connect</i>	55
Connecting in Kurdistan.....	56
Connecting in Saudi Arabia.....	57
<i>Network</i>	58
Networking in Kurdistan.....	59
Networking in Saudi Arabia.....	60
<i>Empower</i>	60
Empowerment in Kurdistan.....	61
Empowerment in Saudi Arabia.....	62
Conclusion: The Music of Multilevel Teaching.....	64
REFERENCES.....	66
APPENDIXES	
A.LALP LESSON PLAN.....	67
B. JOB ADVERTISEMENT IN KURDISTAN.....	72
C. VOCABULARY TEST RESULTS.....	73
D. EMAIL REQUEST AND REPLY.....	75

LIST OF FIGURES

1. The Designation of Levels.....	31
2. The First Day of Class Whiteboard.....	77
3. Checking and Savings Accounts.....	77
4. Translated Vocabulary.....	78
5. Poster Projects.....	78

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Every student has the right to obtain a quality education. The hurdles and obstacles that get in the way of achieving this goal may vary and are dependent upon factors such as economic status, available resources in the developing world, student motivation and the ability that a student has to select a school that he or she may think is best suited to their academic needs and interests. When I was an EFL teacher in South Korea, I saw firsthand the myriad of choices that students as young as 3 years old had available to them. It is nearly impossible to walk down a city street in Seoul or Busan without coming across an academy, or *hogwon*, of some variety. In South Korea, if parents are not satisfied with the seeming quality of education that their children are receiving in a *hogwon*, they may opt to remove their child from their current academy and place them into the latest one that has sprouted up in their neighborhood. Factors such as a well researched and tested curriculum, experienced and competent teachers need not necessarily be taken into consideration, as the appearance of something newer and better often sufficed the appetite of the eager stay at home mother trying to prepare her children for a future collegiate career.

In contrast, many students and parents across the developing world are not as fortunate to have a myriad of choices at their disposal. Often times, educational choices are made based upon affordability and proximity to one's home. In instances such as these, students are often clumped together in classes based on relative age or availability of teaching staff. Within these constraints, students often find themselves in learning environments with students of aptitudes that varying from their own. Within these

multilevel classrooms, teachers are often faced with the challenging task of addressing the needs of students that have not necessarily been assembled for reasons that logically correlate to their proficiency. In such situations, trying to create lessons with a “one size fits all” strategy creates a disservice to the students receiving the instruction as well as to the teacher struggling to work within such limitations.

During the Language Acquisition and Lesson Planning course that I took at the School for International Training as part of the Masters of Arts in TESOL program, I began to revisit these issues and drafted a lesson plan that I thought could be successfully taught in such a scenario (see p.71 Appendix A). In doing so, I was forced to articulate the challenges that I saw and experienced being apart of these teaching experiences. In constructing this lesson about WH-questions, I decided to group students together so that every student in the group would represent a different learning ability. My rationale for doing this was to make sure that all students felt included in the lesson. It was especially important that beginning students had a tangible way of bridging the gap between their L1 and the new material they needed to learn. The greatest resource that I believed would help them achieve this learning goal would be their peers. Being able to reflect on this teaching context by drafting a lesson plan was helpful in contextualizing the type of dynamic that I observed while teaching in multilevel classrooms.

Aim of Study

This paper will contain a double case study of two distinct multilevel classes that I have taught in the Middle East. The first context occurred in 2010 and was a 7th grade remedial English class called 7F in ¹Kurdistan International School and the

¹ The name of the school has been changed

² This is a pseudonym which represents the name of a university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

second is an ESP Banking course which was part of a Continuing Education program where I currently teach. In both instances, I was presented with the challenge of trying to create a constructive learning environment for students that represented a wide range of ability and aptitude. Out of this discord, I attempted to seize the opportunity in having students utilize the most valuable resource they had in the classroom: themselves. Through the facilitation of student centered learning, students were able to work collaboratively rather than competitively or passively. By “subordinating teaching to learning,” students were then given a space to discover and contemplate meaning, rather than receiving it through a prescriptivist, traditional model of learning (Gattegno, 1987).

While in these two teaching contexts, some of the critical questions that I posed to myself were as follows:

- What factors allow for such a disparity of aptitude among learners in a classroom?
- What kind of situations can I facilitate or create to bring students together in a cooperative manner?
- What should I understand or know about my students’ expectations from this course?
- How do my students value and relate learning the English language to their immediate lives?

By attempting to address these questions, my understanding of who my students were and why they had chosen to study English became more complex and rich with understanding. As I went through the process of trying to create cooperative learning opportunities, the ways in which student centered learning could become more strategic

in the language learning process came into focus with much more depth and clarity.

Learning English evolved into a process of not just learning a second language but of understanding different ways of collaborating with others with a common goal and purpose.

Structure of the Thesis

The first chapter provides context for understanding the challenges and characteristics of a multilevel classrooms by reviewing some of the most influential voices on this issue in the TESOL community. The aim of doing this is to delve into a deeper understanding about the implications of what it means to be both a student and a teacher within a multilevel context.

The second chapter will focus on the first of two teaching contexts, a 7th grade class in an international school in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The challenges of teaching this class reflect issues that went beyond the complexity of a multilevel class. It was a context in which pedagogical and institutional perspectives on language teaching did not align.

The third chapter will examine an ESP Banking course, which took place in a Continuing Education program in a university in Saudi Arabia. While both teaching contexts are based in different learning environments, I will explore common pedagogical issues such as needs assessment, student centered learning and feedback. By taking a closer look at these common threads, my hope is also to offer a deeper understanding of the kinds of barriers that EFL learners often face as they endeavor to become proficient in the English language. By understanding both the pedagogical and political considerations at play, the reader will be able to better understand how to productively facilitate a

learning context with such a multilayered texture.

In the fourth chapter, I take the need for a paradigm shift from teacher centered to student centered even further. In this final chapter, I consider the possibility of looking at the classroom as an interconnected community of active participants. By requiring that students work together cooperatively in order to achieve meaning making, they are forced to rely upon each other rather than the teacher who is traditionally viewed as the exclusive source acquiring knowledge. By assuming this proactive role in the learning process, students become responsible participants in their education as well as valuable assets to their learning community.

Chapter 1

Understanding the Multilevel Classroom Environment

The Multilevel Class

Before I delve into the two case studies that this paper will discuss, I first wish to establish a working definition of what constitutes a Multilevel class. A Multilevel, or Multi-ability class has been defined by Natalie Hess as one which “not only differed in language acquisition ability, but also in age, motivation, intelligence, self-discipline, literary skills, attitude and interest” (Hess, 2001, p.1). Traditionally, these classes are also large, as I discovered in the numerous case studies that I came across when trying to understand the challenges that the teacher and the learner typically face in this learning environment. Large, multicultural and varied in both age and ability are factors that are traditionally present. However, neither teaching context presented in this paper fits this typical characterization. On the surface, both classes, the 7th Grade remedial English class in Kurdistan and the ESP Banking course in a university in Saudi Arabia, were

considered to be homogenous in nature as both classes were comprised of citizens of their respective locales. In addition, neither class was especially large, with the largest class never exceeding more than 24 students.

What struck me about Hess' definition put forth in *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes* is that she presented a much more comprehensive definition than the one I was able to generate for myself while teaching in both of these contexts. As stated before, this could have been in part because, in both instances, I taught groups of students in an EFL context which tends to be more homogenous in reflecting the population of the society than ESL classes in the U.S. In contrast, an ESL context often exhibits this prescribed variety due to a predominately immigrant student population that hails from various parts of the world and comes to live in an English speaking country (Bell, 2004). With this in mind, the instances documented here do not prescribe to the confines of an American, community-based ESL school. As EFL contexts which were designed as formal institutions of learning, the challenges observed here are in large part due to the administrative agenda of each institution as well as the lack of will or understanding for how to properly assess and place students in constructive learning environments.

The Challenge of Teaching a Multi-level Classroom

In coming to understand the characteristics of a multilevel class, it is imperative to understand the perceived challenges that teachers face. More than any of the other characteristics that Hess (2001) mentions in her definition, intelligence is usually the most immediate preoccupation that instructors have because "teachers are extremely worried about the fact that they have students in their classes who are at different levels of proficiency" (Harmer 2007, p.127). To this point, when I first began to notice large

discrepancies in my students' learning ability, the major source of anxiety came from trying to find problem solving techniques which would help me become more capable of addressing my students' needs. As my teaching career has been predominately in the field of EFL, I did not take into consideration factors that pertained to issues surrounding seemingly more diverse classroom dynamics in the immigrant ESL class. However, as I learned how to develop rapport with my students by providing individualized attention as well as by taking the time to learn about their culture, I was able to come to a more nuanced perception of their learning challenges and grew to understand them as much more complex individuals.

Reasons for a Multilevel Class

There are several important factors to consider when trying to understand why ESL and EFL teachers find themselves in what can often feel like chaotic and disorganized multilevel environments. The reasons that I am opting to explore for the purpose of this paper are also discussed in Jill Sinclair Bell's (2004) *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL*. I have chosen to focus on the issues of administrative benefits, convenience for the learner, and companionship and support (Bell, 2004) as I was able to draw correlations between the author's rationale and my own teaching contexts.

Administrative Benefits

In the case of administrative benefits, Bell asserts that administrators make placement decisions based on factors such as student interest and teacher availability. For example, if an English school has four newly enrolled students which are true beginners, five which are false beginners and three students which are intermediate learners, the rationale may be to assemble all of the students into one class because, in doing so, the

school saves the need for additional teachers by assigning all of the students to one class, which would, presumably, be taught by one teacher.

In some regions of the world, such as in Southeast Asia or East Africa, the traditional class size is often large ranging between 40-60 students per class (Hess, 2001). In situations where the institutional expectation is for all students of the same grade to learn and take classes together, what is often overlooked is the reality that different students learn in different ways and, as such, bring different skills sets to the classroom. The Multiple Intelligences theory developed by Dr. Howard Gardner successfully illustrates the various possible ways that learners are capable of approaching and understanding new language content. In his theory, he posits the following intelligences: Bodily/Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Musical, Naturalist and Spatial (Harmer, 2007). In addition to having these intelligences overlooked in favor of an academic structure that would appear to be uniform and consistent in nature, the potential of what students are capable of learning is subordinated to the institution's needs to gather students into classes in the interest of what is "good business" but not necessarily for what is good education. A mandate which insists upon forcing students to congregate together simply because they are all in the 9th Grade, for instance (my own example of a 7th Grade class is provided in this paper), allows one to conclude that institutions which define proficiency based on such criteria have a superficial understanding of how to form effective learning environments.

Convenience of the Learner

Another consideration that Bell (2004) presents is convenience for the learner. In some instances, the proximity of the school to a student's home may have the ultimate

consideration over the quality of academics or educational philosophy of the school offering the classes. Another factor may be time availability, as some students will be forced to fit their classes around their work schedules. In addition, some students prefer multilevel classes because they are able to make use of more advanced students to interpret difficult concepts for them in their native language. Regardless, what this decision process reveals is the lack of agency that the student has in their language learning. While this may not always be the case, students that choose their language schools for these reasons often do so with little consideration for the beliefs and educational philosophies of those institutions and more for what they are willing to sacrifice to pay the tuition costs or have in available time (Bell, 2004). Students in these situations may not feel empowered enough to be able to speak with their teacher about their learning difficulties and instead will try to absorb what the learning experience can offer them. In the case of the teaching contexts that I will examine in this paper, students with limited economic resources as well as students from affluent families will be examined.

Companionship and Support

In looking at the final reason, companionship and support, that learners often feel more comfortable studying with students that they know, and this comfort level and sense of familiarity is more important to them than feeling either academically held back or learning at a pace that may seem too challenging for their ability. In direct contrast with administrative benefits, some students actually prefer to seek out opportunities that are multilevel. Whether the decision may be to participate in a class with learners sharing the same L1 as the student, or to simply enjoy the opportunity to socialize with others and

make new friends, this rationale speaks to a level of comfort that a student is implicitly expressing the need for, in order to lower the affective filter during the learning process (Bell, 2004).

After considering those factors surrounding the convenience of the learner, it is important for me to state that in both of these cases, we will examine in the coming chapters, the students were not able to express their agency in selecting the nature of their learning environment. While some of these considerations such as learning with friends was certainly observable, the students within these two contexts were in situations not of their own choosing, and when this constraint is placed upon the learning environment, the way in which students react to their responsibility as learners may often yield challenging effects for the experienced and inexperienced teacher alike.

What are the Major Problems in Teaching a Multilevel Class?

During my research into the teaching and learning difficulties surrounding multilevel classes, I came to realize that most of the obstacles that experts in the field have experienced are also commonplace and widely shared by teachers ranging in ability and years of experience. Bell (2004) does an excellent job of identifying these difficulties and I will discuss the following that she examines here: Methodology, Curriculum, Group Conflict and Assessment and Evaluation, Preparation and Teacher Attitude.

Methodology

For many new teachers, one of the biggest obstacles in attempting to address the learning needs of every student is trying to strike a balance that suits every level of proficiency present in the class. However, determining how best to accomplish this task may take a great deal of patience as well as several “trial and error” attempts in order to

achieve this equilibrium. In an attempt to cater to all of the learning abilities in the class, teachers can often forget that “a teacher cannot be everywhere at the same time, and cannot service the immediate needs of all students” (Hess, 2001, p10). Therefore, a more collaborative learning environment needs to be cultivated in order to ensure that students are able to maximize their class time by working in a student centered environment that promotes practice, application and interpersonal skills development. Other factors such as classroom management will probably also need to be considered, especially in the case of a traditionally large class. In these instances, not only are individual student abilities taken into consideration, but also that of the whole classroom as well.

A teacher needs to ask critical questions such as:

- How long will it take to arrange a classroom in order to complete an activity?
- Have I assessed my students well enough to understand how to divide them into smaller groups?
- Which activities could potentially be the most productive, and which ones may fall apart or become a distraction within the learning process?

Asking these types of questions are important in aiding a teacher to understand what sorts of considerations factor into the lesson planning process. They are also important because they require the teacher to have spent a considerable amount of time getting to know his or her students. Beyond a conventional needs assessment strategy, the teacher must engage his or her students in a variety of ways in order to not only understand their linguistic strengths and weaknesses, but their interests, goals and motivations as well.

Curriculum

After methodology, the curriculum can often feel like one of the most constraining aspects of teaching a multilevel class. Most curriculums are not written in isolation but rather are published as a series containing several volumes. Publishing companies typically design each volume for a specific level of competency in mind. The ways in which publishing companies and curriculum developers make the decision to craft these levels can be based upon a system such as the Common European Framework which offers distinct classifications for the various levels of competency for which these books are designed (“Common European Framework” 2012). For this reason, it is unlikely to find the needs of a multilevel class addressed in such a series or compilation of books. In most cases, assumptions and beliefs about the make up of the class are made based on the purpose of the set curriculum.

This static approach to language learning can often pose a serious challenge to teachers attempting to address multiple abilities within one class. If additional or supplemental activities are not provided within the Teacher’s Manual of a textbook, for example, then it is more than likely that teachers will find themselves spending a considerable amount of time during the lesson planning process trying to find ways to customize lessons that are able to meet the needs of the entire group.

Group Conflict

Hess (2001), and others in the field, give voice to group dynamic issues for students whose national histories share a past mired in conflict, such as Russia and Poland. Instead, I would like to examine a different aspect affecting group dynamics in my two case studies covering gender and cultural values as they are directly related to the

issues in both teaching contexts in this paper. In the case of the 7th Grade class I taught in Kurdistan, I quickly learned how easily divides were made along gender lines. In the lower grades in Elementary school, it was common to have boys and girls sitting with one another in desks of two. However, by the time that the students reached puberty, they had self-segregated along gender lines and even the most casual of friendships were not seen between the two groups. Trying to get students within such distinctive divides to work collaboratively presented serious challenges.

While classes were not segregated by gender, as was the case in Saudi Arabia, there were unspoken boundary lines often governed by fundamentalist religious beliefs. For example, older students or students from more rural areas could disagree with a student from a larger city such as Jeddah or Riyadh about issues related to pop culture, gender or foreign affairs. When engaging in a simple conversation about likes and dislikes, if a student stated that she likes to read Harry Potter books, a student with more conservative religious views might reprimand her for liking witchcraft.

Needs Assessment

In *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL*, Bell (2004) has concluded that assessment is often severely neglected because of “the difficulty of devising an effective evaluative instrument suitable for students with such varied backgrounds, skills and goals.” (Bell, 2004 p.25) This, however, becomes a serious disservice for the teacher as well as the students. A class without adequate assessment puts the teacher in the position of a sea captain who is sailing in fog without a navigation system. Without being able to gauge the capability of the students, the teacher is forced to make projections or guesses about the students’ learning ability based on what they think or believe a student of such age or

educational background might be capable of doing. This may force a teacher to make assumptions from unhealthy vantage points such as stereotypes or outdated statistics. If a teacher is working with younger learners, then gaging their ability based on their behavior will surely not serve the teacher intending on assessing their potential. However, the Bell (2004) articulates the rational of schools which neglect assessing these learning environments by concluding the following:

Many institutions offering a single multilevel class feel that placement evaluation is irrelevant, as there is only one class in which students can be placed. This attitude fails to take into account that such evaluation information is highly useful in developing curriculum and is critical in measuring the students' progress (p.25).

What can be understood from this summation is the unwillingness or inability of an institution to properly understand its student body. It then poses the question: How can student progress be documented or monitored without a way of contextualizing the students' proficiency from the onset of a course? Without such mechanisms in place through both needs assessment and on-going needs assessment, students are also equally lost and without a clear understanding for how to navigate their way through the learning process. In addition, I will argue that one of greatest benefits of assessment is the information that it can produce in order to inform the scaffolding process for the instructor. By understanding where students are in relation to the benchmarks of the course, teachers can then become better strategists and pedagogical guides to help their students acquire language content based upon their own ability and on their own terms.

Assessment and Lesson Planning

It can often be difficult for a teacher of a multilevel class to feel adequately prepared for teaching such a class. If the students are not properly assessed, being able to anticipate learning challenges can often feel difficult to gauge. Trying to create learning situations in which all members of a class can extract a meaning making experience that feels relevant to their aptitude is not an easy task and, as a result, makes lesson planning a much more time consuming process than it otherwise might be. As it has been stated before, coming across curricula that is not designed in an incremental fashion for a single level of proficiency is very rare. Therefore, when a teacher of a multilevel class looks for materials, he or she is often forced to solicit a wide range of resources in order to piece together something that would seem uniquely cohesive for his or her specific learning environment.

Teacher Attitude

For any teacher unaccustomed to a student-centered learning environment, a multilevel class would, with no doubt, be the perfect opportunity to gain experience in such a learning environment. Within the context of a multilevel classroom, it is unreasonable to expect that a teacher-centered environment would be able to service the needs of all of the students present in the classroom. As such, a teacher should not allow a class to dissolve into chaos and confusion either. According to Bell(2004) “ a teacher will need to withdraw support gradually and stress the language learning benefits of new methods” (p.25). As the teacher wanes the students off of a more traditional, lecture based tradition of learning the class will be able to work cooperatively establishing trust and respect amongst the course participants.

What is the Teacher's Role in a Multilevel Class?

As stated before, it not uncommon to find that many multilevel classrooms are also large which may reflect a shortage of teacher staffing within a school. From this vantage point, it is also important to point out that the tradition of teaching within these educational settings are usually teacher centered and impart language learning by way of rote memorization (Hess, 2001). While I could spend time arguing that this method of teaching is counterproductive regardless of the proficiency variety within a classroom, the model of education is especially damaging for the multilevel class.

With regard to the teacher's role in the class, Harmer admonishes that teachers should understand their role through differentiation. He asserts that, "in a differentiated classroom there are a variety of learning options designed around students' different abilities and interest"(Harmer, 2007, p.127). Just as student learning ability, proficiency and learning intelligences are varied, so too, should the approaches and techniques that instructors use in the classroom be varied as well.

One of the biggest obstacles that teachers face in trying to create learning situations that meet the needs of their students is the paradigm shift from teacher centered learning to student centered learning. Bell (2004) contextualizes this difficulty well when she states the following:

In some areas of the world, the student's role is seen as essentially a passive one. Students are raised to regard the teacher as the source of knowledge and the ultimate authority. To question the teacher in any way would be an insult to the teacher's authority. A student's role is to absorb whatever the teacher presents, not to evaluate critically (p.16).

Learners coming from such a tradition may perceive a more interactive or experiential learning environment as chaotic in execution or illegitimate in instruction. The rationalization for this could be stated as follows: How can a student learn if they are not taught to explicitly identify the difference between right and wrong, correct and incorrect and accurate and inaccurate? A change in the students' view of the teacher as the exclusive source of knowledge in the learning experience to understanding how they may use their peers as resources is, arguably, the most important perception shift that must take place before the learning paradigm can be modified and tailored to suit the students' needs.

What is the Student's Responsibility in the Multilevel class?

As it has been established, the teacher of a multilevel class cannot be expected to be the sole provider of language learning in the classroom. Building upon this notion, it then becomes fruitful to explore the kinds of responsibility for which the student should expect to be held accountable. While it is clear that students need to take responsibility for their own learning, a paradigm shift cannot be expected to happen immediately. The teacher's role shifts from lecturer to facilitator which guides the students' understanding of how to negotiate their new responsibilities as language learners.

This shift in learning perception would undoubtedly be challenging for any instructor regardless of their experience or available resources. However, some methods and techniques that are productive within appropriately leveled classes are also appropriate for the multilevel classroom, too. These methods are most readily seen and executed as class activities. Some activities that are the most recommended for multi-ability learning situations are group work, pair work, brainstorming, community projects,

collaborative writing, group poster sessions, field trips, the Language Experience Approach (LEA), and interview questionnaires (Hess, 2004; Bell, 2001).

The common thread running through these activities are their flexibility. For example, in the case of the interview questionnaires, a more advanced student is able to create and ask close-ended questions that a beginning student with less developed language abilities could answer 'yes' or 'no' to (Bell, 2004). Another example that offers learners a flexible and cooperative environment is the Language Experience Approach.

The Language Experience Approach, or LEA "takes a holistic or natural approach to the collaborative learning process, often through visual stimuli such as pictures, songs or movies" (Taylor, 1992, p.1). This approach incorporates the four skills reading, writing, listening and speaking as part of a learning strategy which attempts to examine given content from the perspective of each of the four skills. In the case of a multilevel class, students may work together collaboratively in order to extract meaning from the content which is always student generated. Based on what the students choose to make their 'experience' topic, they can then be broken into smaller groups to focus on using the four skills to identify major concepts such as key vocabulary words or to discuss main characters or story plots.

First, the students may discuss the subject of their experience, and, in doing so, will attempt to draw out meaning from key concepts such as vocabulary words. Secondly, the students can work collaboratively to develop a written account of what has occurred in the experience. For example, students may offer a synopsis of a movie. Next, an elected student from the group may read the group's composition to the rest of the class. Beyond this, the approach offers other possibilities for expanding the experience into a more

diverse array of exercises such as dictogloss and vocabulary review for beginning learners. More advanced learners can expand their meaning-making experience through finding other materials based upon a similar subject or through engaging lower level students by assisting them in peer editing (Taylor, 1992).

After considering all of the various methods, techniques and approaches available to both the teacher and students of a multilevel class, a clearer picture of what a multilevel classroom can look like comes into focus. When students understand that both their role and responsibility in the learning process are not passive but active in nature, how they choose to approach learning content will become alive and dynamic, rather than static and impersonal.

Chapter 2

A Multilevel Class in the Kurdistan-region of Iraq

Overview of the Region

Kurdistan historically exists across the borders of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Kurds are the largest population of people in the world without their own sovereign nation. During the reign of Saddam Hussein, they were a marginalized ethnic minority accounting for approximately 20% of the Iraqi population (Katzman, 2010). Some attempts at breaking away from the statehood of the aforementioned countries have been carried out over the years notably in Turkey and Iraq. The most well known retaliation response has been the biological warfare overseen by the military commander and chief of the Iraqi Intelligence Service Ali Hassan Abd al-Majid, infamously known as ‘Chemical Ali’ (Cockburn, 2010).

Erbil is a city of about 1 million people, and is also the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq. Since the fall of the Saddam Hussein and the

Ba'athist party in the aftermath of the American invasion of 2003, foreign investment has flooded the region, inviting expatriates from all of the world, as well as people of Kurdish descent to come to the region in order to modernize and develop its oil rich potential. A mere drive from one end of the city to the next reveals countless construction sights for residential housing and commerce. Shopping centers such as Majidi Mall and Family Mall have also been built. In spite of having the same sorts of landmarks and typical spaces that any other city in the industrialized world have, it is literally impossible to escape the presence of security in any public space in the city. Metal detectors are present in every major shopping center, hospital and hotel. During the time that I was there in 2010-11, the presence of U.S. military and privately owned contract companies (most of which employed former military), were present as members of the expat community. Within a span of less than 10 years from the time former U.S. President George W. Bush declared 'Mission Accomplished,' a radical change had indeed gotten underway within the region. Among new shopping centers and housing developments such as American Village and Italian Village, an international school, which could service the educational needs of Grades K-12, had also been built.

The sleepy suburb of Khanzad is a 30-minute drive from the city center. This drive from the city to the countryside reveals a landscape of tan, rolling hills with large, majestic mountains in the far distance. Along the way, construction cranes and the cement skeletons of future houses have begun to pepper the otherwise rural and unsuspecting terrain. A mile or so past a checkpoint is the location of the Kurdish International School. Originally built as the premiere school of choice for the children of

the family members of the region's president Massoud Barzani, it also became a strong tool in enticing foreign workers to move and bring their families to settle in the region.

The Teaching Context

After two years of working in the EFL industry in South Korea, I decided to take a sabbatical in the United States. It was during this time that I came across a job ad on the Dave's ESL Cafe website (www.eslcafe.com). The ad said that not only would I be a teacher, but also an important part of the nation building process in post-war Iraq (see p. 76 Appendix B). I wondered when, if ever, I would have the opportunity to go to a remote and potentially dangerous region such as Iraq. I had viewed being an EFL teacher as a unique opportunity to financially support myself while traveling the world. However, I never imagined that going to this part of the world under such circumstances would ever be possible. For this reason, I sent in my resume and, within a week, I was on a flight bound for Erbil International Airport.

Kurdistan International School carried the name of a multinational franchise of schools that predominately exist on the Arabian Peninsula with some schools in North Africa, Western Europe and the United States. The school was a self-contained, gated campus that had security guards clad with AK47s standing watch at all of its entrances. It had multiple playgrounds, an indoor swimming pool, an auditorium as well as a building where teachers' apartments were housed. In its inception, it started by offering Kindergarten to grade 3. As interest in the school grew so did its student body, resulting in one new grade per year. When I taught there during the 2010-2011 academic year, the school was offering K-10.

The mission statement of the school is the following:

The School will be recognized as a provider of top-quality education to a highly diverse student body. It will strive to help all students achieve their full potential, prepare all students for success in college, equip them with the ability and desire for lifelong learning, and strengthen their civic, ethical and moral values. The School will maintain high standards of efficiency and accountability throughout its operation (personal communication, 2010).

With such an educational philosophy, this made me wonder what I had to look forward to in the coming months. Clearly, this school was making history in the region, being the first private school of this caliber to ever be established, and seeing this mission unfold daily in action would be a very unique experience. Clearly, the school accepted a great deal of responsibility for the role that it had given itself, its students and the community at large, but how it would be executed was something that I was eager to find out for myself.

The Learning Culture

With little notice of my arrival from Human Resources, the school's administration had me observe a few classes before assigning me a fulltime schedule. Of the classes I saw, the first thing that I immediately noticed were their size, especially in comparison to the classes that I had taught in South Korea. Many English academies in South Korea typically cap their class sizes at about 12 students per class, as parents want to be ensured that their child receives as much individualized attention as possible. While Korean public school sizes are large, the pressure and responsibility for producing quality English instruction is placed upon the afterschool academies where students may focus upon specialized areas such as Conversation, Essay Writing or TOEFL and TOEIC prep.

In contrast, these classes contained as many as 40 elementary school children wearing white and gray school uniforms, most intently focusing at the lesson written on the blackboard by a young, 20-something teacher. After determining who the well behaved and higher achieving students were, the teacher was supposed to assign prefects, or group leaders, to assist in tasks such as checking for the completion of homework assignments and passing out handouts. They could even have the privilege of writing the names of naughty students on the board during class changes and at lunch breaks. Being a prefect was a highly coveted position, creating a hierarchy among the students. However, these were not students engaged in conversation nor were they free to spontaneously express themselves by striking up a conversation with the teacher about their plans for the upcoming *Eid Al-Adha* holiday, for example. They were not vivacious and extraverted like my old students in Busan, and they were not being creatively challenged to reflect on their ideas like my writing students in Seoul. Instead, they were being asked to repeat or mimic what the teacher was saying in order to memorize the content of the lesson. While I didn't realize it at the time, this was my first introduction to rote memorization. In *Paradoxes and Possibilities: Creating Participatory Learning Communities*, Elsa Auerbach (2000) states, "When the teacher is seen as the expert whose task is to transmit knowledge, to fill learners with new information or skills and where their knowledge is excluded, learners are left silenced and powerless"(p.5).

Reflecting on what I had seen demonstrated as this school's interpretation of "top-quality education," I am now able to understand the ideological conflict which would lay the foundation for all of the other teaching difficulties that I would encounter throughout my tenure as a teacher at this school. Trying to engage students whose sole method of

self-expression was to act out and misbehave in class in learning helped me to understand that the student perception of language learning was not antithetical to the learning process. As I would come to understand, these students wanted to learn, but they wanted to be actively engaged in their learning process. They wanted to have the agency to create a diverse amount of output and for such output to be recognized as legitimate and having value to the educational experience of the classroom.

The Classroom Experience

After a month of teaching a 4th grade class, I was informed that my schedule would be changed in order to help a teacher with a very large class of 6th and 7th Grade students. A meeting time was arranged for me to meet with the head of the English department to discuss the transition. During this meeting, I was told that I would be given a class of twenty-five 6th and 7th Grade students. I found this to be especially unusual as most classes ranged between 30-40 students as mentioned earlier. My new class was to be smaller than most due to the fact that I would be relieving my British male colleague of some of his students who were considered to be the worst behaved and most academically challenged students in both grade levels. I was told that I would have to “lay down the law” and make it very clear from the onset that I was in charge so they wouldn’t act up and try to take control of the class. Suddenly, my sweet 4th Graders seemed like a distant memory, rather than a lovely group of students only two buildings away.

As I walked into class on the first day of the new winter term, I quietly took in the scene of frazzled and confused teenagers. Apparently, they had not been given prior notice about the class being split and bickered amongst themselves about where to sit,

which books use, etc. After spending the greater part of the first class sorting out new books, confirming a class list and arranging a seating chart, they studied me carefully, as though looking for chinks in my teacher's suit of armor. I suddenly felt as though I had been dropped in the middle of an inner city classroom that I desperately wanted to escape.

Over the subsequent weeks, I passed other Middle School teachers in the hallway going to and from class. My colleagues rarely smiled and, on most days, appeared tired and ragged as did I. The teaching culture at the Kurdish International School was one of survival. The goal was that by making it through a day, one could make it through the week and then, ultimately, make it through the year. It was commonplace to hear teachers shouting at the top of their lungs just to be heard over 40 students. Most teachers felt overwhelmed by classroom management issues, and the school must have known this because each floor of each building in the school had an adult supervisor whose job it was to deal with disobedient students after the teacher had dismissed them from the classroom.

In order to enrich the reflection process of this teaching experience for myself, I decided to contact my British colleague whose students I adopted and helped to co-teach. I asked him for feedback about his time teaching these students because I was curious to know how he would interpret the teaching challenges that we all collectively faced. Of this time, he responded with the following reflection:

The emphasis of the one-size-fits-all approach was a major challenge. Students were expected to slot straight into the system with their appropriate age-level regardless of background education/English proficiency, and if they didn't fit it

was the teacher's problem. This was extremely challenging as a teacher, as half the class fit in and either the extremely poor or outstanding ends of the spectrum (with the extremely poor being the larger of the two). Essentially I was told to "teach to the middle", the result of which is that I had a lot of extremely bored or extremely frustrated students. The obvious solution would be to have separate classes based on ability, but such a seemingly obvious answer suggested by many teachers was deemed against the system's philosophy" (personal communication, 2012).

I find myself in complete agreement about the frustrations that my former colleague expresses in this email. Forcing students into a learning situation based upon the superficiality of age or grade did little to service the diverse array of needs present in each class. Within the framework of the school's leveling system, students were always confined to learning situations with their peers based on age or grade. The notion that the students were divided up within a grade level for the sake of proficiency was merely an illusion that did not reflect student ability. For this reason, the range of ability that could exist within one class could range from false beginner to intermediate in every level that each academic grade was broken into.

Leveling for Proficiency

In the case of the 7th Grade, the students were divided into six sections, or levels of proficiency, in a range of A-F. Students assigned to a Level A class were considered to be on par with their Native English speaking counterparts. Level B was considered to be very good, with Level C receiving an average assessment. By Levels D and E, students were considered to be struggling or of low proficiency. Classes were often combined due

to teacher shortage or if students in neighboring grades, such as the 6th and 7th Graders that I started with, were considered to have comparable proficiency, then two levels could be combined and this would be expressed as Level DE, for example. However, classes such as DE or EF were also classified as “accelerated classes.” The idea behind accelerated classes wasn’t to suggest that these students were ahead of their grade level, but was instead used to describe classes that needed to study a larger breadth and body of content in order to catch them up to the rest of the grade. For example, a Level A class may have only had 10 Spelling/Vocabulary words per week, whereas an accelerated EF class would have had 40 words per week. By the time they got to Level F, students were considered to be so remedial that their chances of catching up to the more proficient students seemed hopeless. The following figure was constructed from memory and is based upon the leveling system as it existed during the 2010-2011 academic year (see Figure 1).

Level	Proficiency Strength
A	At or near Native English ability
B	Still considered to be exceptional but not quite at Native ability
C	Average ability, second language learning difficulties in grammar and pronunciation become visible
D	Students produce the output of a second language learner, struggle in the Four Skills as well grammar and pronunciation
DE/EF	A class combined of two different grades which performs as an EFL class while using Native language curriculum and

	instruction
F	Poor proficiency, lacks basic linguistic fundamentals such as phonics, pronunciation, and simple sentence structures are not present

Figure 1 The Designation of Levels

What exacerbated both the learning and teaching process even further was the fact that the school self-identified as an “international” school that prided itself on being able to provide an education of comparable quality to that of an Native English speaking western school. As such, there was no provision or curriculum in place for EFL students, as they clearly did not fit in to this idea of a western transplanted school in the Middle East. Students that were unable to meet the requirements of Level A might have used the curriculum for Grades 5 or 6, or even lower, depending on the initial proficiency assessment. For this reason, it was possible to have a group of 6th or 7th Graders reading the same graded readers as a 3A Elementary class. The school’s refusal to identify that Second Language Learners comprised the majority of the student body made the chasm between language learning, and the content appropriate for learning to occur, even wider. As the teacher of this class, I struggled to bridge the gap between the needs of the students and the curriculum made available to address those needs.

7F

After three months of teaching the mixed 6th and 7th Grade class, I was then informed that the class would be split up yet again, this time by grade, the larger 6th grade class to be assigned to my British colleague, and the smaller 7th grade class to be given to me. This time, I would have a class of fifteen 7th graders that would be known by the system as 7F. The classes were broken down into 15, 50-minute classes per week. Within

this time span, teachers were expected to cover grammar, vocabulary, writing, a graded reader and spelling. Based on the schools' leveling system, it would have been logical to assume that the students in the class would reflect the lowest proficiency in the entire grade. However, it became clear after a short amount of time that this was not the case. The range of grade point average (GPA) varied and was as high as 95% and as low as 20%. As I looked at the assessment data given to me during a faculty meeting, I couldn't believe that such a range could exist within a class that had, seemingly, been assembled for the purpose of teaching so-called Level F students.

Grammar

For the grammar class, each student had the same grammar book filled with units addressing different tenses and exercise pages that accompanied each unit. For this class, I was expected to teach the rules of each unit and then allow the students to complete the exercises by themselves. Typos were often found in this book and having to explain to the students why they should listen to me and rather than adhere to the printed words in front of them was often an ordeal. Very little group work was ever done in this class. Students usually worked with their neighbor or by themselves. If we ran out of assigned pages for the week, I was expected to bring worksheets to class in order to reinforce that week's grammar points. In terms of group work or other activities, only worksheets were permitted outside of the set curriculum. Allowing students to be physically engaged in the class was strongly discouraged. There could be no rearranging of desks or educational games. The only time that the students were permitted to come to the board was to erase it for me at the end of class.

Vocabulary and Spelling

Vocabulary and Spelling are interrelated in that the vocabulary words were always the same words used for the spelling unit. Because 7F was considered to be an accelerated class, these students were responsible for 40 words per week instead of 10 words per week. Aside from this, these words were often very difficult for the students to comprehend, but were, nevertheless, taken from their graded reader. For example, the story of Shaka Zulu might use a word such as *impale* to describe how the main character threw a spear. This example not only highlights the lack of appropriacy for a 7th grade English class, but also exposes the lack of Comprehensible Input available to the EFL students in this class. As a result, getting through all of the words, explaining their definition and reviewing their spelling was never achieved on a weekly basis. This can be best understood by examining the Input Hypothesis developed by Stephen Krashen.

According to Krashen in order for language acquisition to occur, the level of the learner must be $i+1$ so that the distance between what the learner knows to what the learner is capable of learning is achievable through incremental steps (Schutz, 2007). In contrast, what was experienced by this class could more accurately be described as $i+5$. As such, it was extremely difficult for the students to have achievable meaning making experiences because the point i which represents what they could do was too far removed from what the students were capable of learning.

Because spelling tests were conducted on a weekly basis as practice for the monthly exam, students who often did well on the exam did not necessarily have the ability to explain the definition of the word nor were they able to use it properly in a sentence. It was clear that rote memorization was once again surfacing as the primary

learning strategy in order for students to reflect what they knew in order to appease the needs of standardized testing.

The Graded Reader

The graded reader stayed with each class for a two month term. From the reader, vocabulary and spelling words were extracted. A typical reading class would cover one chapter plus reading comprehension questions that came in an accompanying workbook. I would start the class by reading the chapter aloud to the students. Then, the students would take turns reading one paragraph each or less if it was too difficult. Afterward, the class would answer comprehension questions together.

What I noticed from these lessons was how the students attempted to learn material that was above the $i+1$. Often, if questions were directly taken from a phrase or sentence from the reading many of them could piece together some form of the correct answer, even if it wasn't in a complete sentence. However, if the question was an inference or an opinion the response was very different. They would often scan the chapter for words stated in the question and then read back the sentence. While reading strategies such as skimming and scanning were attempted, they never would be successfully used due to fact that the content was too difficult. As a result, these students struggled to gain meaning without assistance. Worse yet, if they were asked to state their opinion about the plot, they had a very difficult time understanding why it couldn't be found in the chapter.

Writing

In the Writing class, the main objective was to try to help the students understand how to write a basic paragraph. This involved teaching the students how to write a topic

sentence and then how to construct a supporting sentence for that given topic sentence. The majority of these paragraphs required the students to write about a special person in their life such as a best friend or a family member. Very little deviation often occurred in the manner in which this unit was taught. Week after week, students repeated the same assignment, trying to improve upon spelling and grammar.

While this unit was not as daunting as the graded reader in that it presented a much more achievable outcome, the drilling tactic that was used for spelling, vocabulary and grammar was still an important part of the learning process. Therefore, the students were not learning how to express their own opinion through writing. Instead, they were memorizing the appearance of an expressed opinion so that they could duplicate it and produce a favorable result on the upcoming examination.

Teaching to the Test

Approximately every four weeks, or once a month, I was expected to administer the Continuing Assessment Tests, or CAT exams, to my students. These exams were given specifically for assessing all of the units previously mentioned. Anything and everything that was taught during that one-month increment could potentially be on the examinations. This “teach to the test” method of approaching language learning posed several issues for both the students and myself alike. Drilling was considered the most effective way of ensuring retention. By taking a deductive approach at learning and forcing students to review the content of a lesson over and over again, the anticipated outcome was that the students would begin to memorize the prepackaged lesson. This, of course, was not evidenced in the test results that followed [see p.72 Appendix C]. Even still, this was the system’s way of ensuring guaranteed results that could give account of

both learning and teaching success.

The Strategic Assembling of Students

Because the test results were considered to be of such paramount importance, the school's administration attempted to devise a way of maximizing every teachable opportunity possible. For example, an Extra Support program was initiated for one hour after school each day in order to give additional instruction to students with a track record of failing their exams. Another opportunity was Saturday school. Every other Saturday, students were expected to attend classes that were intended to address certain problem areas in the learning content. However, the most drastic attempt taken in order to get each class to produce an average of 70% or better was also the source of why the classes were discovered to be so multilevel from the onset.

When I began teaching this multilevel group of Middle School students, I couldn't understand where the rationale or justification came for placing a student who could read a chapter in a book, earn a 100% on a 40 word Spelling test and write a paragraph about her favorite person in the same class as a student who earned a 20% percent on a Reading test, wrote pure chicken scratch for essays and could barely read two or three words from a graded reader without stopping to verify the pronunciation of almost every word. What I discovered about this discrepancy was more appalling than the aggravation of classroom management, disrespectful and sometimes confrontational administration or the countless hours of unpaid overtime. As I attended countless faculty meetings where we were all collectively lectured to and verbally reprimanded if our classes produced low results, I came to the following realization: The multilevel classrooms at the Kurdistan International School were designed intentionally to have

classes mixed with a combination of low, intermediate and higher achieving students in order to guarantee that the school would be able to satisfy the benchmark of having all of their classes meet the 70% requirement. And, worse yet, there was nothing I could do to change it.

The Administration, Assessment and Accreditation

As the Kurdistan International School was relatively new to the Middle Eastern franchise whose name it bore, there was a process of vetting before the school could receive full accreditation from its corporate headquarters. This vetting was evidenced by visitations from the corporate office at various occasions throughout the school year. They would come into any given teacher's classroom unannounced and observe either part or all of a lesson. Presumably, teacher trainers as well as stakeholders from the corporate office wanted to hold the school accountable for the quality of the instruction that we were providing. They were looking for concrete evidence that their system of teaching was being faithfully executed and could demonstrate a uniform agreement with the other company schools. However, the most critical piece of data used as evidence that Kurdistan International School was meeting all necessary academic expectations was its test results. In order for the school to be viewed as successfully providing a quality education, each class in the school needed to average a 70% or higher on all administered exams regardless of the subject area. Any class lower than this percentile was considered to be at risk and in danger of jeopardizing the school's accreditation process.

Learning Through Adversity

While it can be argued that there are indeed advantages to multilevel classrooms, the situation which fostered this environment clearly did not have mechanisms in place to

capitalize on those advantages. As there were no real opportunities to engage students in a collaborative learning process, to facilitate language learning from a holistic approach, or to appeal to their Multiple Intelligences in any meaningful way, I was in a context where I was forced to deny my students the right to be acknowledged as learners that were complex and gifted individuals. Auerbach (2000) asserts that,

Students are seen as experts in their own reality, and, as such, invited to believe in themselves. This means investigating, validating and extending what they can and want to do rather than stressing what they can't do or imposing what experts think they should be doing(p.7).

Therefore, by imposing the standards of the school, I contributed to the impediment of my student's education because following the status quo meant taking away their agency and right to be valued as fully engaged members of their learning experience. It was clear to me that following the status quo was not yielding desirable results, yet a more productive alternative did not seem available. Even the smallest of gestures, such as allowing the students to write their answers to an exercise on the blackboard was observed through the glass window of my classroom door and then swiftly reprimanded via email for allowing students to get up from the chairs during class.

Feeling ill-equipped of agency myself, I left this teaching context in June of 2011 exhausted and disillusioned by the original expectations that I had had for this teaching experience. What I left behind was a group of students eager to be acknowledged and accepted as credible members of a learning community by their peers and their teacher. Making the effort to get to know my students by taking generous asides in class to ask

them about their families or their plans for the weekend helped to establish a rapport of trust and respect. However, even as I made this effort, I could not deny the fact that this extension of myself to them could only be appreciated by the students who had the linguistic ability to take advantage of it. For the others who could only speak in broken words or phrases, a mere smile, a translation through a friend or a sticker in a copybook had to suffice.

Even to this day, I am reminded of this disservice to their education on my Facebook account. The students who were the higher performers in the class still keep in touch by occasionally emailing me or posting a comment on my Facebook wall. In contrast, the students who greatly struggled as false beginners in the class don't keep in touch because they wish not to, but because they are still struggling on their path to literacy. However, when they finally do make it, I'll be waiting on the other end of the computer with an 'LOL' (Laughing Out Loud) and an 'OMG' (Oh My God).

Chapter 3

A Multilevel ESP Banking Course in a University in Saudi Arabia

The Teaching Context

In September of 2011, I started teaching at Saudi Women's Business University in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia.² The university is located on the outskirts of the city, miles away from the landscaped streets and highways trimmed with palm trees. Less than 10 years old, the women's university was founded and developed only after the school began as a men's college in 2004. The inception, and subsequent expansion of the school was considered to have been part of *Tatweer*, a Saudi educational reform put in place in order to engage the kingdom's students in learning experiences that would

² This is a pseudonym which represents the name of a university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

encourage independent ways of thinking (McEvers, 2010). As it is a business school, it offers both MBA and Bachelors degree programs with all classes being taught in the English language.

Before the students may enroll in academic classes, they must first complete an English preparatory program if not assessed as being prepared for academic study. The preparatory program is designed to take two academic years for students who start at level one and progress through all subsequent levels of study. On occasion, other English classes have been developed at the request of various organizations that have contacted the university to provide English language instruction. This chapter will examine such an outside initiative developed through the Continuing Education program.

The Continuing Education Program

During the last term of the 2011-2012 academic year, my English teaching colleagues and myself were notified that an evening program would be starting during our last term, which would span over the months of April and May. The purpose of the classes was to culminate in a certificate program in Human Resources, Banking or Insurance. In addition to taking an English ESP course in one of these subject areas, the students would also take a course of the same content area in Arabic. The students in this program were to be primarily funded by a government grant program, which would finance their tuition for the term. The classes were to be held in the evening as many of the students had jobs during the day and would be taking classes during their free time. The classes were two hours each day from either 3:30-5:30 or 5:30-7:30, five days a week.

Needs Assessment

The initial estimate number of students to be expected for this program was in the hundreds. As a result, the exam hall was made to accommodate enough chairs with attachable desktops to fit two hundred students per needs assessment test sitting. The needs assessment test consisted of two sections, one to assess Writing and one to assess Reading Comprehension. The Writing section offered two or three options. The student was then required to complete the test by answering a prompt such as, “What is your idea of a perfect day?”

For the Reading section, a student could be presented with a picture and then asked a multiple-choice question about the contents of the picture. While the Reading section allowed for a certain amount of chance that comes with the odds of correctly answering a multiple-choice question, the Writing section clearly did not. As a result, students performed poorly on the examinations. In most cases, where students could not understand the directions, they would merely rewrite the directions so as not to leave the test page empty. As we went through the process of sorting all of these examinations by levels of proficiency, the overwhelming majority were testing as either true beginners or false beginners, with a very small amount testing at an intermediate level. If there weren't enough students available to make a distinct intermediate level class, I wondered how the program would rationalize fitting classes together, other than the students' expressed interest in Banking, Human Resource or Insurance?

Teaching Expectations

The initial pretext of this class was to be an ESP course in Banking. As such, the teachers assigned to this program were expected to compile a series of book chapters,

worksheets and other activities in order to make our own course book for the class. Without having a clear idea of who our students would be or what their capabilities would be evaluated as prior to the placement test, we were advised to assemble material that would be relatively suitable for beginners. In addition, teachers that had taught the class the previous year, stated that it was a highly undesirable teaching environment due to the large class sizes, class management issues and the low level of the students that typically participated in this program. We were also told that the standards and benchmarks of this course were not intended to be as rigorous as the regular daytime preparatory classes, and, therefore, were advised, “Don’t worry too much. Just take it easy with these girls and try to get through as much material as you can.”

The Classroom Experience

The first day of my ESP Banking course was on April 21st, 2012. I was assigned two sections of this Banking course, one commencing at 3:30p.m. and the other at 5:30p.m. As of the first day of class the documentation that we submitted to have bound together as a course book had not been completed and given back to the school. Therefore, I had no book, no agenda and no lesson plan. What’s more, the only background information that I had about my students were their names. From this list, I was not able to determine if they had been grouped together based on proficiency or just mere happenstance. In essence, I began feeling as though I was completely in the dark about who my students were and what we were expected to be doing together. For these reasons, I began the class as I had many times in the past. I started by introducing myself.

Inevitably Ecological

A self-introduction to a room full of new students appeared to be the perfect icebreaker for the first day of class. I then asked each student to introduce herself by telling everyone her name and her age. After some minutes, when all of the students were finished introducing themselves, I invited them to play a guessing game. The object of the game was to guess my age. This was especially pertinent because not only had all of them just shared this information with the rest of the class, but it was also my birthday. After many guesses, I revealed to them that I was 31 years old, which garnered much surprise and amusement.

Dates, Months and Time

From this activity, which thankfully took between 30-45 minutes, I took a look at the board and focused on my birthdate, April 21st, 2012. When I taught Elementary school students in South Korea, one of the first things that we did as part of our daily routine was to go over that day's date. I wondered how many of these students knew how to say or write the date? Did they know their days of the week? On a micro level, did they know how to tell time? I knew that the material that I had collected for their course book had very little content about the issue of time, yet, as I stood there in front of them, I began to realize what an incredibly important concept I had almost overlooked. Taking the time to scaffold these important concepts would be my objective for the rest of the class as well as the rest of the week(see p. 81. Figure 2).

We went over how to say each month of the year and day of the week in order. We also went over how to write and say a date in 'KSA time,' day/month/year, as well as how to say and read the date in 'USA time,' month/day/year. Because of the placement

tests, I didn't want to make assumptions about what they knew. Doing this would have only frustrated the scaffolding process rather than using it to pay attention to key conceptions and problem areas.

The Students' Expectations

It is not common practice for the English preparatory courses at Saudi Women's Business University to use textbooks. As the preparatory program identifies with a more student centered approach to learning, textbooks or course books have been systematically rejected in hopes that doing so will allow for a more experiential and proactive learning environment for students that are traditionally used to being passive in the learning process.

As I asked my Banking students to stand up and introduce themselves before the entire class, or on other occasions when I asked for someone to volunteer to participate in a role play, I was aware of the clear hesitation and awkwardness that such requests evoked. These were students that were clearly used to being lectured to and, as such, were accustomed to being the recipients of knowledge, rather than the learners of knowledge. The difference between a recipient of knowledge as opposed to a learner of knowledge is based upon the student's relationship to the learning process. A recipient of the first merely takes in new content without having to produce output, or demonstrate any new understanding with the given content. In contrast, a learner of knowledge not only takes in new content, but is also able to use it in order to improve language proficiency.

Clearly, one of the biggest challenges that would have to be addressed, even before the issue of negotiating a multilevel classroom, would be a shift of perception in

the role of both the student and the teacher. As the students gained experience in meaning making through an experiential way of learning, I believed that they would gain a greater sense of responsibility for their role as students. Through becoming active learners by participating in class and working with their classmates in problem-solving situations, I envisioned that the classroom experience would become a more productive and dynamic space that could be utilized to its fullest.

Approaches, Methods and Techniques

Realia

As the course progressed from the first week, I continuing pursuing the theme of time, and with it, added concepts of money. Still waiting for the course books to arrive, my students forged ahead learning how to convert Saudi Riyals into U.S. dollars, Euros and British Pounds. Because we did lack a book, I wanted to try to find outside materials that I thought would enhance the Banking curriculum being exploited in class and give it some real world relevance. After some searching on the Internet, I found some blank check templates that I thought could be used as a great way to apply all of the concepts that we had thus far been working on in class. The only problem that I foresaw was that the blank checks were American and not Saudi. Even still, I thought they could serve as an excellent tool to give the students the opportunity to practice concepts such as writing the date and writing monetary amounts in both numeric and written form. In addition, we could have also gone over the reasons for why people use checks as well as important vocabulary such as withdrawal, deposit, checking, savings, and bank teller(see p. 81 Figure 3). However, when I presented this activity to the class, they were very quick to point out the differences in Saudi checks from the template that I had given to them. Even

still, I took this as a valuable opportunity to discuss the differences between the two banking systems. At the end of the activity, one of my students loaned me her checkbook and allowed me to make a photocopy of a blank check to use in the future.

Roleplaying

The purpose of using roleplaying was to offer students the opportunity to practice speaking situations that would require them to incorporate the new language content being introduced in the course. For some role-plays, each participant would practice with me being either the bank teller or the customer. In others, they would practice with a partner, and then “perform” their role-plays for the entire class. Getting students to come up in front of the entire class was important to me as the instructor because I wanted their language practice to be given legitimacy by being acknowledged by all members of the class. Rather than hearing a cacophony of voices all chattering on top of each other, I wanted the students of this classroom to get accustomed to listening to one another, to respecting and acknowledging each other as members of the classroom. Being able to inject humor into a skit, or having students randomly call out answers, helped to lower the affective filter and gradually made them more at ease with practicing in front of others.

CLL

Wanting to exploit the use of technology that all of the students had in their cellphones, I attempted to incorporate CLL, or the Communicative Language Learning approach as part of our classroom regime. As part of introducing new role-plays as well as new vocabulary, I would have the students use the voice recorder option on their phones and would speak each word or phrase. Next, I would have one of the more

proficient students in the class speak the word in Arabic so that both words would carry the same association in meaning when reviewed at a later time. However, after a few attempts at trying this, the students wanted to stop. When I asked why, they answered, “We don’t like Arabic, only English.” Ironically, I thought that by using both languages it would become an aid not a hindrance to their English learning. Clearly, my preoccupation was with accuracy, whereas theirs was with fluency.

Using Color-coding in the Translation Process

While the technique of using colors began merely as a way of being able to draw distinction between two competing concepts, such as a question versus an answer, over time, the use of colors became an irremovable staple of the learning experience. The four main colors that I used were black, blue, red and green. Black and blue were often used for writing questions or posing math problems, whereas red was typically used for writing answers and green was almost always used for writing Arabic translations(see p. 82 Figure 4).

As the course progressed, I began to rely on these color distinctions as a means of being able to draw attention to distinct matters that I wanted the students to focus on. While I would not argue that it was imperative that it be done this way, I noticed that the different elements of language represented by their respective color gave them a sense of autonomy on the board, rather than looking at a group of words bleeding together in one color. As a teacher, it helped me with the intentionality of my decision-making and forced me to question why and how I chose to present information.

Creating Communities within a Multilevel Classroom

As this term progressed, I started to think about how I could break apart these two multilevel classes and make them more productive. I felt that this was necessary because not doing so would only further complicate the teaching and learning relationship.

Beyond this, the wide variety of ability in the class was apparent from very early on in the course. The fact that most of the students did poorly on the entrance examination did not reflect the diversity of learning abilities that I encountered. One important reason is because the Arab world is part of an oral tradition of communication. Even the prophet Mohammed was believed not to have written the Qur'an, but rather to have recited it as the name of the holy book translates to mean "recitation" ("Qur'an" 2004). In Arab culture, a *Dewaniya*, is a gathering of elders that come together in much the same fashion as a town hall meeting. Leaders of a community gather together and discuss any number of topics while enjoying the pleasure of each other's company ("Dewaniya" 2012). As such, it is fair to reason that students coming out of such an oral tradition could score poorly on writing and reading assessments, as they would not have been predisposed to excelling in these particular skills. However, once the course began, it became clear that not only were students of mixed ability, the range of such ability was far wider than what could homogeneously be addressed in a traditional academic setting.

The Classroom as Community

There were a few important reasons why I thought it was important to view the classroom as a community. First, people in communities are typically prone to want to help one another and create situations for cooperation that benefit the whole group. Within language learning communities, it is possible to foster learning in such a way that enables students to rely on each other in problem-solving tasks. By doing so, they are

then able to establish trust and mutual respect. Three of the key focus points that I tried to use in the community building process were:

- Getting to know the students
- Seating Arrangements
- Making class participation fun

Getting to Know the Students

I started with getting to know my students because I thought that this would be the most comfortable and accessible frame of reference for them. By doing so, it became much easier to get a sense of my students' proficiency level as well as both the mistakes and errors I was able to detect while they practiced using their English. Detecting key issues such as subject-verb agreement, tense conjugation and article misplacements were all gleaned through this process. In addition to aiding the needs assessment process, it was also helpful in understanding who my students were as individuals because by doing so, I knew that I could have a better sense of what their motivations were as students and what their own personal goals and objectives for the course would be. From this line of inquiry, I was able to understand that I mostly had students that just wanted to have the opportunity to practice English. They weren't especially preoccupied with Banking in particular, although they took the lessons earnestly and, as a result, did learn some essential vocabulary and language skills suitable for such a context. I learned that many of them were in their early 20s and either worked during the day or stayed at home at the behest of their family. Others still, had never attended university and were merely curious to know what the university learning experience would be like if they ever did become

students. They were content to be in class and socialize with the other girls and make new friends in the process.

Seating Arrangements

As I got to know my students, one of the first things that I noticed was their tendency to sit not only with their friends but with other students of the same proficiency level. While there are certainly specific kinds of activities or learning objectives which would benefit from having students sit together for the sake of proficiency, it was important to me to have each seating arrangement in the class reflect a cross section of all ability levels as much as possible. One of the reasons for this was to address the fact that I, as the teacher, did not speak my students' L1, Arabic. In order to ensure that true beginner students weren't left behind, I chose to separate them and have them work with students that could translate and clarify new material when needed. Doing this was also in part to ensure that all students could have a meaningful language learning experience within their own Zone of Proximal Developments or ZPD. I initially worried that more advanced students would feel bored or kept behind. However, over time, I observed that this learning arrangement actually empowered them with a sense of responsibility for their peers' learning as well as aided in creating new friendships.

Making Class Participation Fun

As stated earlier, activities such as role-plays were specifically orchestrated for the purpose of creating a paradigm shift to get the students from seeing themselves as passive learners to active learners. However, another purpose for such activities was also for how they lowered the affective filter. Whether the students did role plays or poster projects, they never behaved as though they were being evaluated in the same manner as

an examination, and yet, I would argue that requiring students to use their language skills with such spontaneity was actually more of a rigorous demand than being required to produce one static and conclusive answer on a test. Even in instances where students worked individually, as in the case of the poster projects, they were still able to share collectively and exchange their ideas and thoughts with the members of their work group as well as with the rest of their class (see p. 82 Figure 5).

What I Learned: The Importance of the Role of Intermediate and Advanced Students

As a result of working in this particular multilevel teaching context, my awareness about several critical aspects of teaching were raised. First, above any particular approach, method, curriculum or course book, students are always the most valuable resource in the classroom. Being able to give upper level students a leadership role in the class helped to bridge the gap in understanding for the true and false beginners. Whenever I did a demonstration of a role-play, I would ask one of the intermediate students in the class to model it with me. After we were finished, the same student was able to field questions from the class in Arabic and relay the gaps in understanding to me. This was especially needed because otherwise I would not have been able to gauge the needs of the class. Being able to have this kind of feedback allowed me to become better at how I used scaffolding in my teaching. As a teacher, it can be very easy to take certain pedagogical aspects for granted, especially when one is coming out of a tradition of teaching that differs from the class' previous learning experience. Being able to elicit feedback from my students helped me to better craft the goals and expectations that I made for the class on a daily basis.

The Importance of Individualized Attention for Lower Level Students

While this chapter places a great deal of emphasis on the benefits of collaborative learning, a teacher should also be encouraged to look for opportunities to work with students individually. In the case of my true beginners, I began the practice of pulling them out of activities individually to work on improving their skills set. For example, I might have worked with one student on the proper way to hold a pencil and print the Roman alphabet, along with pronunciation and vocabulary. Being able to take this time out while the rest of the class was working was important for a couple of different reasons. First, students that are aware that their skill set is significantly lower than their peers are very hesitant to participate in class in fear that doing so will highlight this disparity. Under other circumstances, such students would be the beneficiaries of a remedial program, which could devote all of its time to addressing their needs. As this was clearly not a viable option, the intention behind working with them individually, rather than cold-calling and putting them on the spot in class, was to lower the affective filter and reduce their learning anxiety level significantly.

Feedback as a Logical Meaning-Making Tool

While one may devise strategies and constructive agendas for achieving optimal learning in an EFL or an ESP course, even the best of intentions cannot be fully realized without eliciting feedback from the students. In my experience, I found that asking for feedback at the end of every class was helpful in understanding if the objectives that I set for the course had been met. This, however, was not a practice that I began from the onset. As I was instructed to think of this context as an ESP course rather than an EFL course, the peripheral vision that I had for eliciting feedback was not related to objectives

outside of helping my students learn how to communicate with an English speaking client in a bank. However, as the course eventually neared its end, I realized that some of my students regretted not having enough time to practice English conversation in order to improve speaking skills. Because I was so focused on a narrow set of objectives, I failed to see the greater picture in that the course, above all else, was a language course.

I could have remedied this by the way that I elicited feedback about their expectations. In a situation like this, it would have been acceptable to have shelved whatever preoccupations I had with the banking content because, as I came to know my students, I understood that their agenda was to improve their English language abilities in as many regards as could possibly be addressed during the course. Because I was afforded the flexibility that I had in this context, I would have instead broadened my horizons for what I could have done with the class by having an open and honest discussion about what aspects of English language learning meant the most to my students. While a variety of responses would have undoubtedly been represented among them, it would have given me a better composite sketch about understanding their needs and interests in learning English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As I understood by the very end of the course, some of the students felt that learning English was one of the most important things that they would invest in trying to learn in order to become competitive in the workforce. As they viewed it, the English language was a key that created access to a large global economy and market. As Saudi women prepare to face the needs of an international market in the 21st century, they want to make sure that they can participate fully in that greater global conversation.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

“Connect, Network, Empower”

Both of the case studies in this paper featured multilevel classes with a series of distinct issues. With the 7th grade class in Kurdistan, the teaching context constrained my ability to construct the type of learning environment that I thought would best suit my students’ needs. It was clear to me at the time that the only way the institution was interested in measuring the progress of learning was through tests that primarily required the students to do nothing more than to simply regurgitate the content of lessons that had been endlessly repeated for retention. This type of “one size fits all” evaluation not only failed to assess the students as individuals, but it also failed to recognize the diversity of needs and aptitudes that existed within that classroom. In the case of the ESP Banking course for young adult female students, I was extended a great deal of flexibility with regards to choosing the kinds of materials that I could use in order to teach the class. However, poor needs assessments also created classes with a large array of ability, which demanded time and attention for devising strategies in order to create the most optimal learning environment possible.

In the process of doing research for this paper, I was looking for a framework or a paradigm that I could use in order to contextualize some of the important teaching lessons that I have learned from both of these experiences. In the book, *Multilevel and Diverse Classrooms*, Jo Bertrand (2010) employs the idea of “Connect, Network, Empower,” in her case study of teaching Chinese nuclear engineers and secondary teachers. What struck me about this framework was how I was able to relate it to my own teaching

contexts. By taking a closer look at this framework, I hope that a strategy for how to approach teaching a multilevel class will be understood.

Connect

As reflected in both case studies, a teacher can come to understand the needs of his or her students beyond a conventional needs assessment or placement test.

Understanding the students' expectations for the course is important in understanding both their interest in the content as well to anticipate their motivation levels. In addition, getting to know students personally, rather than just as people encapsulated within the role of "learner," is also a tremendous benefit as it helps in building trust and respect.

Allowing students to define their role as learners, helps students to realize the importance of their class participation. A student that is engaged in the classroom also has a unique sense of worth and validity as a person capable of being a successful problem solver.

Connecting in Kurdistan

Looking back at my tenure in Kurdistan, I am not able to offer easily implemented solutions to the serious issues that this school had in creating meaningful learning experiences for its students. The fact that the classes were multilevel was merely one factor in the equation. Understanding how to provide quality content in the four skills is a problem that continues to ail this institution. Large, over-crowded class sizes created yet another obstacle in enabling teachers to connect with their students or to have students to feel connected amongst each other. Looking back, the only way that I believe I, or any other teacher at this school, could have affected any serious change would have been to break convention by secretly using outside curriculum in order to engage students in the learning process. I view this as relevant to connecting with students because it is

my belief that in order for a student to feel connected as a member of a learning community, they must first feel that the purpose behind their participation carries relevance for their lives. However, with CAT exams looming on a monthly basis, it would have been difficult to have had to negotiate the class time in such a way that would have serviced pacifying the needs of the administration and that of the needs of the students.

As a teacher, I was not in a position to give feedback about the weaknesses in the curriculum nor was my opinion being solicited to create improvements in order to enhance their educational system. However, during the summer of 2012 while finishing course work for the Masters of Arts in TESOL program at SIT Graduate Institute, I chose to make my Curriculum, Development and Assessment course portfolio on this teaching context. As part of the Scope and Sequence section, I outlined units that I thought would appeal to the interests of my students in order to engage them in the learning process. Rather than have them read stories about ruthless warriors, I focused on issues of nationality, international relations and global connectivity. My objective was to help my students to realize who they were within local, regional and international spaces. I believed that by making the course content relevant to the interests of these learners that their ability to connect with the learning process would happen organically, feeding off of the students' motivation.

Connecting in Saudi Arabia

While I was fortunate to not have faced the same hurdles during this Banking course as I did teaching in Kurdistan, there are clearly different issues that could be revisited and done differently if ever the opportunity to do so presents itself in the future.

While I have to be pleased by how I started the course as I had no available book for the first two weeks, I would have taken more time to have learned about the students' motivation for being in the class. As stated in Chapter 3, more than learning about banking or finance, the students just wanted to have the opportunity to learn English. Offering a broader scope of topics and class activities would have made the course even more meaningful than what it wound up being. In hindsight, I did not take advantage of the flexibility and creative license that I so desperately craved during my time in Kurdistan. This lack of peripheral vision on my part limited the available options that could be presented in class. Using a student-generated approach to this course would have meant that banking could have been the launching off point to have explored a number of other topics such as shopping, job interviews, ordering food at a restaurant and many others.

Network

As stated in previous chapters, I was a firm believer that in order for students of a multilevel class to become fully engaged in the learning process that a paradigm shift from teacher centered to student centered needed to occur. Within the parameters of a student centered classroom, students were given the responsibility of working cooperatively in order to participate in the learning process. This happens in such a way that allows the students to negotiate their meaning making within the learning process. In this way, the "one size fits all" mold for learning is swiftly dismantled and students are given the opportunity to use their peers as a resource. By learning to work with others, students place a different value on what it means to collaborate and achieve success through teamwork. These kinds of opportunities allow for a dialogue to occur that give

students the opportunity to negotiate the type of meaning making they wish to achieve during their learning process. A sense of interdependency is extracted from this learning environment, which creates a more dynamic and lively class that is not static for being obliged to a certain set of criteria. Rather, it is organic and in constant flux adhering to the needs of the learning situation as determined by the students.

Networking in Kurdistan

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the student dynamic among Kurdish teens self-segregates along gender lines. Thus, having students work in mixed gender settings can often create conflict as well as class management issues. However, within this context it would be necessary due to the fact that the majority of the higher achieving students in the class were female and all of the lowest achieving students in the class were male. Within this setting, I would have broken the class into four teams of four or five students each. Within every team a student of each proficiency level would have been represented—or as much as possible. Each team would select its own team name as well as its own team captain. Each team would be scored on a weekly points system for things such as completed homework, class participation, behavior and attendance. In order for each team to earn the maximum amount of points available every student in the group would be required to achieve all assigned benchmarks to the best of his or her ability. In this situation, the students would not only hold each other accountable but they would also be forced to work together in the best interest of the team. At the end of the term, the team with the most points would win a prize or a special class privilege. I believe that this kind of networking has the ability to create communities among students that would be unlikely to work together otherwise. By creating synthetic frameworks for learning, the

students themselves can personalize and humanize what it means to be a part of their team and their classroom.

Networking in Saudi Arabia

As in the case of the Kurdish students, I would have also created groups of varying ability in the Banking course in Saudi Arabia. However, I would have also created groups based on mutual interests. By eliciting more feedback from the onset of the course, I would have been better able to gauge the interests and motivation of the students. With this information, I would have proceeded to have grouped them together based on mutual interests or goals for their language learning and had them work together on class activities or projects. They could have performed skits about their topic (i.e. shopping) and followed up with comprehension questions for the rest of the class. Breaking the class into different workstations in this way would have made the classroom environment much more dynamic and versatile than merely focusing on one specific topic alone. From this experience, it would help the students to find common ground in shared interests regardless of their English proficiency.

Empower

By facilitating opportunities for students to learn from one another and negotiate meaning making, the students are given the chance to realize their full potential as learners. Allowing classrooms to operate as communal environments forces each student in the class to draw from the most valuable resource that is available to them which is their peers. A classroom dynamic that combines both respect and responsibility can motivate students to realize their full potential as a citizen of an educational community. When students understand that each of them have important roles to play within the

meaning making process, the weight of their contribution is put into a much different perspective than it would be in a teacher centered context. Not only do students have a more enriched educational experience by learning to work through cooperation, they are also held accountable for the contributions they are capable of making within this paradigm. This sense of accountability, of understanding that others depend on their input in order to learn, creates a sense of duty and responsibility to the other members of the group as well as to themselves. From this responsibility, a sense of autonomy is achieved, as each student becomes a bearer of a piece of knowledge attempting to fit together a greater jigsaw puzzle in what is the language learning process. This sense of responsibility is empowering to the student because it enables them to realize the importance that their role as a learner has to the learning process. When a student is expected to demonstrate their ability as a bearer of knowledge, and not merely as a receptacle of knowledge, their role as a learner becomes empowered. When that same student works in concert with other students to produce output, an interconnected web of meaning making begins to form. In a multilevel classroom, it is crucial that this occurs in order to ensure that the needs within a range of ability are addressed. The challenge for myself was to find a way to make the learning process an experience that transcended obstacles related to proficiency so that a meaningful learning experience could be carved out for every student.

Empowerment in Kurdistan

Looking back at my time spent teaching in Kurdistan, I have often felt that this experience was one of my biggest failures as a teacher. Neither my students nor myself were in a situation where learning could be optimal in order to address the host of

learning issues that this class exhibited. However, it was a valuable experience just the same. From this context, I gained a stronger appreciation for the importance of student centered learning. After reflecting upon this teaching experience, I have realized that learning is a much more dynamic experience than an institution with a “one size fits all” mentality could possibly ever be able to host. I learned that needs assessment is just as important as effective learning strategies and quality curriculum. Indeed, they are all integrated in creating an optimal learning environment. From teaching these 7th grade students, I learned that when I kowtowed to the school’s expectation of “teaching to the middle” that, instead, I effectively taught to no one. In a multilevel class, there is no middle ground because this learning environment is much too complex to think of it in terms of there being a class norm that exists along with other ranges of ability. In hindsight, I’m not even sure if I know what “teach to the middle” even means. However, what I have learned is that seeing students as learners bearing a unique set of skills rather than test score data is the first step in understanding how to face the challenges of a multilevel classroom.

Empowerment in Saudi Arabia

When I set out to write this paper, the first thing that struck me about the issue of multilevel classes were the motives and circumstances that allow them to exist. In the case of the Banking course, I was fully aware of the attitude that the university had towards the Continuing Education program. It was one of apathy and complacency, so much so that books were allowed to be delivered to students late with no real consideration given to leveling other than scheduling conflicts. Yet, despite low expectations for these students, I saw them empower themselves. They had an agenda

even if the institution did not. They wanted to learn English because they viewed that learning this language was in some way linked to their ability to become successful in an Arab-speaking world. From this motivation, I learned that students carry a tremendous sense of determination and flexibility to overcome learning obstacles when they are intent on doing so. I also learned that there can be an immense sense of freedom and creative license in teaching a multilevel class. As I established a feedback loop with my students about their needs and interests, the possibilities and directions that the course could take were molded to fit to the identity of the class as a whole rather than to the identity of a specific proficiency level. I also learned that, despite the institutional implications for why some multilevel classes are randomly put together, the ability to learn and succeed ultimately resides with the course participants themselves. I was initially disappointed that the university projected the Continuing Education program as a chore that most dreaded having to do and therefore placed little effort in. However, I learned that the value of the education does not necessarily reside in the quality of the textbooks or the prestige of the institution or even in the skill of the teacher. It resides in the students. The classroom is their world, and what they choose to make of it depends on their motivation and determination to succeed. As the teacher, I could not force them to succeed or learn English because my ability to facilitate was based upon their willingness to be facilitated. In this way, I saw these students as extremely empowered despite their educational or economic disadvantages because they knew what they wanted to achieve. As the instructor, it was my responsibility to provide the space to make this learning opportunity possible, but it was their decision to use it.

Conclusion: The Music of Multilevel Teaching

After nearly two years after teaching in Kurdistan and six months after teaching the Banking course in Saudi Arabia, I have come away from both teaching contexts with a much more complex understanding of what is required to teach a multilevel class. The things that make a multilevel class the most challenging are also often what make it the most vibrant as well. Having to facilitate a course with a wide range of ability by using techniques or strategies that would more effectively work in a leveled class is similar to an orchestra conductor trying to get all of the musicians to play a symphony by using the score for flute section. This is impossible because this score was specifically composed for the flutes and would be taken out of context by asking the bassoons or the saxophones to interpret the same piece of music. It would be unfair to both the other musicians as well as to the intent of the composer. Teaching a multilevel class is the same way. Expecting a false beginner to produce the same output as an intermediate student is unfair to the student as well as the design and purpose of the curriculum. So rather than expecting all of the students to conform to a static approach of learning, it is important to understand each student's contribution as having value and worth in the classroom. While the wind chimes may not have the same resonance as the entire trumpet section, they are both still playing music.

I believe that the key to successfully teaching a multilevel class resides in the teacher's ability to facilitate harmony within a classroom. By facilitating an opportunity for students to produce the best possible output for their ability, students can learn to listen to each other in a way that is cooperative and productive to the learning process. What this will ultimately aim to accomplish is a diversity of learning achievement that is

meaningful to the students in order to be able to create a greater conversation or symphony of language.

References

- Auerbach, E. (2000). Paradoxes and possibilities: Creating participatory learning communities. Hall, J& Eggington, W (Eds.), *The Sociopolitics of English language teaching* (p.143-164). Clevedon, UK. Multilingual Matters.
- Bell, J. S. (2004). *Teaching multilevel classes in ESL*. Toronto, CA: Pippin Publishing.
- Bertrand, J. (2010). *Multilevel and diverse classrooms*. Baurain, B. &Phan, L. (Ed.). Matoon, IL. United Graphics, Inc.
- Cockburn, P. (2010). Ali Hassan al-Majid: Iraqi official known as 'Chemical Ali' executed for genocide and crimes against humanity. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/ali-hassan-almajid-iraqi-official-known-as-chemical-ali-executed-for-genocide-and-crimes-against-humanity-1878828.html>
- Congressional Research Service. (2010). *The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq*. Washington, DC. Katzman, K.
- Gattegno, C. (n.d.). *What we owe children*. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/educationalolutions/what-we-owe-children-web-book>
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching*. Edinburgh, UK: Pearson Education Limited.
- Hess, N. (2001). *Teaching large multilevel classes*. Cambridge: Cambridge, UK University Press.
- McEvers, K. (2009). *Changing the way saudis learn: Reforming saudi education*. Retrieved August 14, 2011, from <http://www.slate.com/id/2226874/entry/2226875>
- Qur'an. Retrieved from <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/texts/quran.htm>

Schutz, R. (2007). *Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition*.

Retrieved July 2, 2007, from <http://www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html>

Taylor, M. (1992). The Language experience approach and adult learners. *Center for*

Adult English Language Acquisition. Retrieved from

http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/lea.html

Wikipedia Common European Framework. (n.d.) Retrieved October 30th, 2012 from

Wikipedia:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages

Wikipedia Dewaniya. (n.d.). Retrieved August 26th, 2012 from Wikipedia:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dewaniya>

APPENDIX A**LALP LESSON PLAN****Lesson Plan****Name: Teresa Hernandez****Date: August 3, 2011****Lesson Topic:** Wh-questions**Length of lesson:** 100 minutes(two 50 minute classes back to back)**Class Information:** 15 Kurdish/Arab 13yos**Level:** Multilevel**Timetable fit:** N/A**Instructional Arrangement(s):** rowed desks**Materials:** picture(drawing)
chalk, poster board, markers**Aids:****Objective(s):**

- **SWBAT exercise critical thinking skills *to* make their own inferences and draw their own conclusions when presented with a visual aid**
- **SWBAT construct syntactically correct Wh-questions in order to find out information**

I assume the students can already/already know:

What a street looks like, the different kinds of shops that can be found in a neighborhood, have a basic grasp of transportation and neighborhood vocabulary

I anticipate students will have problems with: the grammatical construction of Wh-questions

To solve/avoid these problems I plan to: use 'noticing' by writing the students' questions on the board and comparing them with their correctly constructed counterparts

Objectives for myself in my learning of teaching:

IWBAT:

- assist in activating schema by having Ss review the picture in its entirety
- guide students into composing Wh-questions
- use 'noticing' as a way of correcting sentence structures

Time	Lesson Stage	Procedure/Steps	Beliefs underlying your choices	S-T interaction	Materials and Aids
10 min	Warm up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T will take attendance • T will ask Wh-questions about the students' weekend <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What did you do this weekend? ○ When did you go? ○ Where did you go this weekend? ○ Who did you go with? ○ Why did you go there? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging Ss in basic conversation introduces them to the topic 	T-Ss	
45 min	Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T will write Who? What? Where? When? Why? on the blackboard • T will attach a picture to the blackboard of a city street • T will elicit Wh-answers about the picture from the students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where can you buy a hotdog? ○ Where can you go to buy a comic book? ○ What time of day to you think it is? ○ What is the name of the city? ○ Who wants to take the taxi? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking Ss to answer questions about the picture will activate schema and help them practice forming complete statements • By using 'noticing', the students will become aware of poorly formed sentence structures 	T-Ss Ss-T	Picture, chalk

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Who is riding quickly on their bicycle? ○ When do most people take the bus? ○ What day of the week do you think this is? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ss will be instructed to form Wh-questions of their own orally <i>based on an observation from the picture</i>. • T will write each S question individually on the board and have all Ss copy them in their <i>journals</i> • T will use 'noticing' for sentences containing errors and, in these instances have the Ss write both sentences in their journal. The Ss will be asked to use pencil for the S sentences and red pen for the T sentences 			
25 min	Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T will break Ss into groups of 3. The groups will be comprised of one advanced, one intermediate and one beginner S • T will assign each group a different character in the drawing • T will advise Ss to answer the five Wh-questions when writing a 5-7 sentence paragraph about their character • T will take turns with each group and aid with any grammatical or other expository issues that may arise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving Ss the opportunity to work together to use Wh-questions will raise awareness for how these questions develop into a story • Composing a story by answering the Wh-questions will raise awareness of the role Wh-questions have in developing a narrative 	Ss-Ss T-Ss	Paper, pencils
20 min	Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T will divide the class into three groups of five, one group for advanced, one for intermediate and one for beginner • In their separate groups, each S will take turns asking a Wh-question in order to determine which character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dividing the class by level of proficiency will help to ensure that all Ss get equal time to practice the L2 • using the Wh- 	Ss-Ss	Paper, pencil

		their classmate was assigned. Ss will be guided to answer all questions in complete sentences. T may use scaffolding by providing an example.	questions in this way develops the Ss critical thinking skills and raises their awareness about the kind of questions that storytelling should ask		
--	--	---	--	--	--

Lesson Planning Reflections (use another sheet if necessary)

After planning your lesson, think about and articulate this: **Why did you make the choices you did in planning the lesson?**

I chose to approach Wh-questions in this manner because I believe that offering a creative outline for students to practice their writing will motivate them to develop their grammar and extend their vocabulary usage. I also believe that using the story format for Wh-questions will help students understand the kind of necessary information that good storytelling needs.

After peer teaching and having been given feedback in your peer teaching group: **What did you learn from teaching the lesson to your peers? What did you learn from their feedback? Will you change anything next time you teach this lesson? What?**

Response to peer feedback:

I felt that my peers gave me the opportunity to explain what noticing is and why I wanted to use it. This was helpful in reaffirming why I think it is a good way of revising/editing. They also seemed to like the quality of the visual aid which is why I emailed everyone the link for it. Apart from this, the response seemed more thoughtful and solemn. I felt that I could have done a better job of expressing my ideas by doing more of a mini-demo than just explaining and reading verbatim from the plan itself. I noticed that this is what my peers took more time to do in their presentations. Overall, the response seemed 'normal.'



APPENDIX B**JOB ADVERTISEMENT IN KURDISTAN****Vacancies Available in Kurdistan, northern Iraq**

Do you want to contribute to rebuilding a nation? Do you want to experience living in a new culture? Do you have college student loans to repay?

If you answered YES to any of the above then visit [REDACTED] website to apply to [REDACTED] in Kurdistan. VACANCIES ARE AVAILABLE AT [REDACTED] in KURDISTAN

Join the [REDACTED] team and make a difference in the lives of children and young adults by delivering a high-quality education for a changing world. We are currently seeking English teachers for the KG, primary and secondary levels at [REDACTED] in the capital city of Erbil for the new academic year 2012-2013. As of September 2008, ISC-Erbil has re-located to a new state-of-the-art campus which features a library, modern classrooms, computer lab, a semi-Olympic sized swimming pool, athletics track, football pitch, basketball courts and staff accommodations. Preferred applicants should be native English speakers, holders of a university degree and carry experience in education.

All applicants must send their CV/Resume [REDACTED]. Only short-listed applicants will be contacted. Other positions available at [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] in northern Iraq is always looking for motivated and energetic professionals. Individuals interested in joining [REDACTED] can learn about current vacancies or different career opportunities at anytime by visiting the above site. The [REDACTED] consists of 80 member schools in 15 countries, educating over 60,000+ students worldwide

APPENDIX C**VOCABULARY TEST RESULTS-PAGE 1**

Dear all,

H [REDACTED] Grammar 73% - Vocabulary
60% Lovely result for grammar but the Vocabulary needs a little more work.

H [REDACTED] Grammar 77% - Vocabulary
71% Great results for both sub-subjects.

I [REDACTED] Grammar 67% - Vocabulary
60% Nice average for Grammar but we need to have a think about how to improve the vocabulary.

I [REDACTED] Grammar 70% - Vocabulary
72% Great results!

J [REDACTED] Grammar 72% - Vocabulary
75% Great results!

K [REDACTED] Grammar 73% - Vocabulary
72% Great results!

L [REDACTED] Grammar 70% - Comprehension
72% Great results!

EF [REDACTED] Vocabulary 33%- We need to talk. I'll pop the exam in your pigeon hole so please look over it and we will meet on Monday at 3.45pm in the conference room.

EF Ms. Hernandez Vocabulary 29%- Please meet me in the Conference room at 3.45pm on Monday.

6 FG [REDACTED] Vocabulary 49%- Let's meet on Monday.

7 FG [REDACTED] Vocabulary 42%- Monday, please.

6 GH [REDACTED] Vocabulary 36%- Monday at 3.45pm please.

7 GH [REDACTED] Vocabulary 4t3%-Monday at 3.45pm please.

APPENDIX C**VOCABULARY TEST RESULTS-PAGE 2**

8 GH [REDACTED] Vocabulary 50%-
7 HI [REDACTED] Vocabulary 49%- Monday, please.
8/9/10p HI [REDACTED] Vocab 44%-
8 IJ [REDACTED] Vocabulary 51%-
9/10p IJ [REDACTED] Vocabulary 46%-
JK [REDACTED] Vocabulary 46%-
KL [REDACTED] Grammar 55% Vocab 53%

I have placed a copy of these exams in your pigeon holes so that you have a chance to look over them before Monday.

One more thing - can you please tell me the number of Vocabulary words your students were expected to memorise for this exam?

Thank you,

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

Head of English Department

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX D**EMAIL REQUEST AND REPLY PAGE 1**

Hi Teresa,

Sorry for the slow reply. Currently in the process of packing up and moving on again.

Regarding my time at [REDACTED] I found that teaching at two separate schools I had the opportunity to experience the common weaknesses in the system and the challenges these pose to teachers. Firstly the lack of required experience (which, in a way, was a good thing as it allowed me to get the opportunity in the first place) and training. Particularly in Oman, we were given 2 weeks of "orientation" which was essentially a long presentation on the merits of "The Points System", with no real emphasis on what to expect and how to deal with the everyday challenges in the classroom. The only way to overcome this was to learn as I progressed, but I feel this resulted in wasted time due to my lack of knowledge of the system, classroom management etc. which was poor at the beginning and took some time to improve.

Secondly, the emphasis of the one-size-fits-all approach was a major challenge. Students were expected to slot straight into the system with their appropriate age-level regardless of background education/English proficiency, and if they didn't fit it was the teacher's problem. This was extremely challenging as a teacher, as half the class fit in and either the extremely poor or outstanding ends of the spectrum (with the extremely poor being the larger of the two). Essentially I was told to "teach to the middle", the result of which is that I had a lot of extremely bored or extremely frustrated students. The obvious solution would be to have separate classes based on ability, but such a seemingly obvious answer suggested by many teachers was deemed against the system's philosophy.

Dealing with both schools' administrations was another challenge, as it seemed their policy was to either ignore or pacify the teachers any way they could. My solution to this was that I would avoid all contact with (almost) all of my superiors because I felt that it was a massive waste of time. Such a lack of communication and support is obviously no way to run a school, and I felt that many of the schools' problems could be attributed directly to this.

Anyway, hope this is enough and it helps.

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX D

EMAIL REQUEST AND REPLY-PAGE 2

Dear [REDACTED]:

The purpose of this email is to ask you a about your time teaching at [REDACTED]. To be specific, I am in the process of gathering data and doing research for my Masters thesis in Teaching. I want to focus on the struggles and challenges that teachers face when confronted with large, multi-level teaching contexts in hopes at arriving at some possible solutions or alternatives for these particular obstacles. What I am requesting is just a few lines summarizing your experience working at [REDACTED] in either Oman, Kurdistan, or both, if you wish. Looking back at those experiences, what were some of the greatest challenges or frustrations that you faced on a regular basis? Did you find any successful solutions to these issues? If not, why not?

Thank you for your time,
Teresa

P.S. Neither your name of [REDACTED] will be directly named in the publication of my thesis. I will use a pseudonym for the school

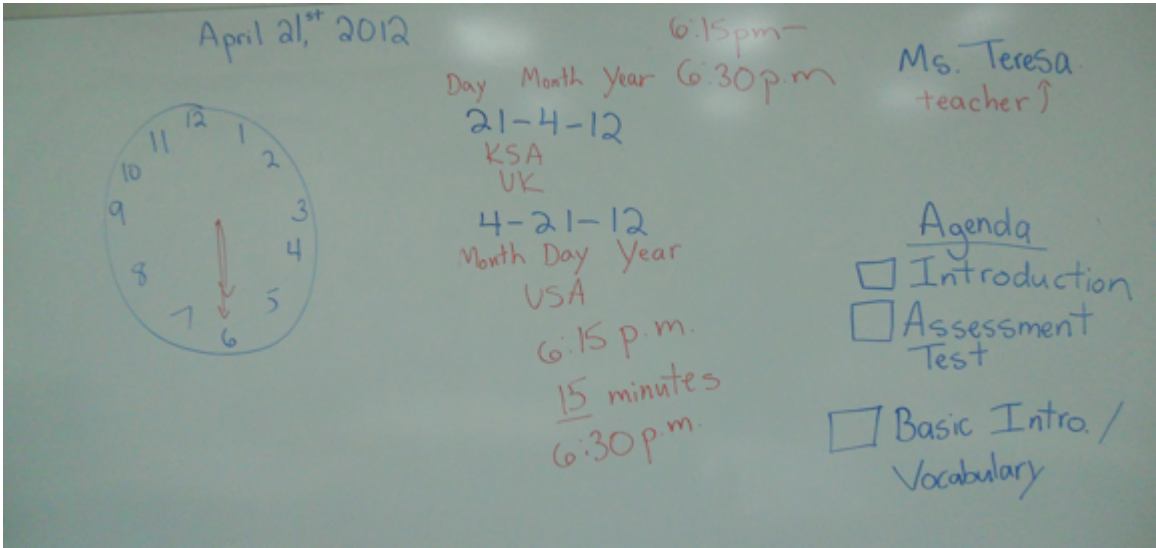


Figure 2 The First Day of Class Whiteboard

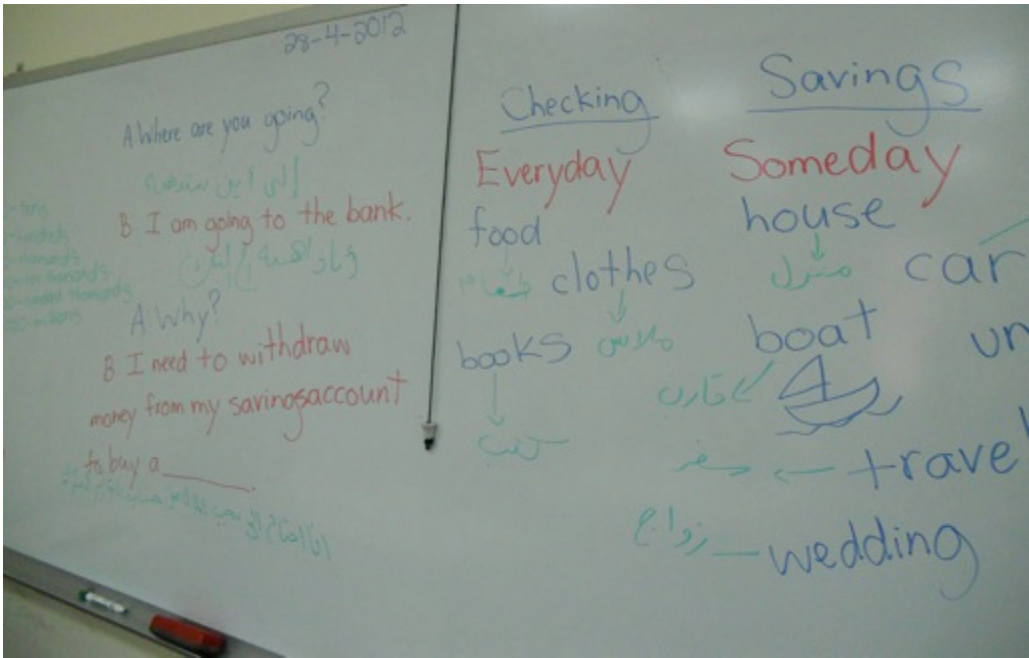


Figure 3 Checking and Savings Accounts

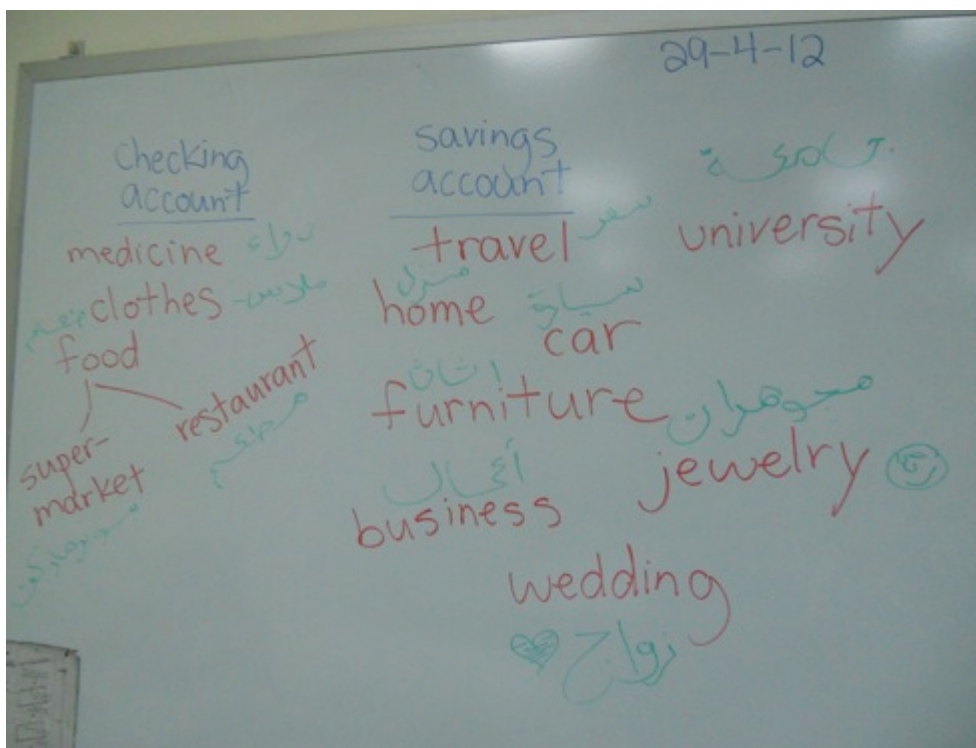


Figure 4 Translated Vocabulary



Figure 5 Poster Projects